

NATURAL COMMUNITY TYPES

Watauga County is seventh in the state in numbers of natural community types, at 24. Natural communities are a distinct form of biodiversity, important in their own right and also important as “coarse filters” that ensure conservation of the many species which are poorly known or not yet rare. The Natural Heritage Program’s natural community interests include protection of the highest quality examples of each community type, as well as examples of rare community types and those that support rare species. Natural community types -- reoccurring assemblages of populations of species naturally associated with each other and their physical environment -- can be recognized as distinct forest, rock outcrop, woodland, shrubland, or wetland types. In most cases, biologically significant sites are delineated around good examples of natural community types. Although significant sites are sometimes recognized simply for rare species, most contain examples of one to several community types ranging in quality from fair to excellent. The presence of rare species usually augments, but does not completely determine the significance of a particular site. Attributes of communities which influence site significance most are the rarity of the community and its quality, condition, and extent. Although communities often grade into each other without distinct boundaries, classification which divides the continuous variation into distinct types is necessary for describing communities and for planning their conservation. The natural community types used in this report correspond to the current state classification of community types (Schafale and Weakley 1990).

Table 2 contains the natural communities documented from Watauga County, arranged in ecological groupings which reflect relationships between them. Ranks which indicate their global and in-state rarity are provided, with an explanation of ranks at the end of the table. Ranks for communities were developed by the N.C. Natural Heritage Program from information on their rarity range-wide (i.e., globally) and in state. Short descriptions of each community type follow. For additional information on these communities and their floristics from a statewide perspective, refer to Schafale and Weakley (1990).

Natural Community Type Descriptions

Acidic Cove Forest is common in the mountains of North Carolina in sheltered sites at low to moderate elevations on well-drained, acidic soils. The forest canopy is closed and generally dense, with dominance shared among a few cove species such as sweet birch (*Betula lenta*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), yellow poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), Canada hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), and red oak (*Quercus rubra*). The shrub layer is characteristically dominated by very dense great rhododendron (*Rhododendron maximum*). The herb layer is typically sparse, although dense beds of a variety of herbs may occur in openings. Few rare plant species are associated with this community.